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ABSTRACT

The acceptability of a sentence is dependent on context: some sentences look awkward in isolation but improve in an appropriate context, whereas other sentences look all right in isolation but fail to fit certain types of context. Of particular interest is the degree and specificity of textual fit of different thematic (theme-rheme, topic-comment) variants of a sentence. A hypothesis worth further testing is that thematic variants can be ranked on a scale of markedness when in isolation (for instance, sentences with topicalizations being more marked than untopicalized sentences), and that the more strongly marked a sentence structure is, the stronger must be the textual forces motivating its use in context. Considerations of this kind are relevant to error evaluation. In advanced teaching of composition and of foreign languages, judgment should not be passed on sentences mechanically and in isolation. The ways in which they fit their context and contribute to the information dynamics of their text should be considered. (Author/CLK)

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CONTEXTUAL ACCEPTABILITY AND ERROR EVALUATION

1.1. My take-off point is the observation that the acceptability[1] of a sentence is dependent on context. More specifically, context can affect acceptability in two ways. It may improve acceptability: there are sentences which look awkward in isolation but which improve in certain contexts. Or it may impair acceptability: a sentence may look all right in isolation but all the same fail to fit certain frames in text and situation.

1.2. One common type of sentence that looks awkward out of context is a non-initial, synsemantic (as opposed to autosemantic) structure, that is, a sentence which cannot stand alone because it contains anaphoric or deictic references to context or situation. Thus sentences such as

(1) (a) Not so harmless is the pompous obscurantist jargon which sociologists have devised.
(b) Such was the penalty of failure.
(c) Especially is this true if the comparison is made between two large groups.

are all sentences which cannot normally stand alone or

1 By 'acceptability I mean the relation between an utterance and its evaluation by a suitably selected group of informants, whereas 'grammaticality' refers to a relation between an utterance and a specific description, 'grammar', of the language in question.

initiate a text. Their grammatical structure is all right, but they must have a preceding context if they are to be textually well formed. It is another matter that writers of fiction or poetry often begin texts with sentences containing anaphoric or deictic references. But such literary 'pseudo-givens' are used with a conscious literary purpose. They activate a convention that writer and audience share a make-believe background. They are, in other words, a writer's signal to his readers to suspend their disbelief and agree to follow the rules of the literary game.[2]

1.3. Sometimes an unusual, and in that sense strongly marked, syntactic structure is justified by the stylistic context. For instance Wyndham Lewis's sentence

(2) Be touched by this woman he must on occasion.

would readily invite correction if it occurred in the essay of somebody learning English. However, in its own somewhat florid literary context,

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2 See George Rostrevor Hamilton, The Tell-Tale Article (London 1949). Literary anecdotes too show how authors have looked at pseudo-givens. The following quotation deals with Tolstoy struggling with Anna Karenina: "A few days later, on 18 March /1873/, he went into his son Sergey's room and noticed a book lying on a table, which the boy had started to read: Pushkin's Byelkin Tales. He leafed through it and was as charmed as ever by that lovely prose. The story called Loose Leaves began with the sentence, 'The guests were arriving at the country house ...' For Tolstoy this leap into the heart of the matter was the summit of artistry. He thought of it in relation to his own characters, and his desire to write returned at last, after months of indecision - irresistible, dizzying, painful as thirst. He rushed into his study, seized a pen and wrote down the first words of an opening chapter, 'After the opera, the guests reassembled at the home of the young Countess Vraski.' (In the final version this sentence, somewhat altered, appears at the beginning of Chapter 6 of Part II. It was a long-standing and erroneous family tradition that Tolstoy had begun his book with the sentence, 'Everything was topsy-turvy in the Oblonsky house.')" The quotation comes from pp. 478-9 in Henri Troyat, Tolstoy. Pelican Biographies, Penguin Books Ltd.: Harmondsworth, 1970.

(3) But at last, sorely wasted by his six weeks of immobility, Don Percy was able to get up and to crouch in an armchair for three or four minutes, his head spinning. The two sisters, Teresa and Inés, hissing at each other like a couple of pledged conspirators, in stage-whispers, made his bed. But he felt very sick. And again contact with Sister Teresa was imperative - which made him more sick than ever.
Be touched by this woman he must on occasion, that there was no avoiding: though sometimes he would push her hand away and curse under his breath. Yet half-fainting, there was no way out. He was picked up out of the chair, in which he was sinking, and lifted back into his bed, by these tenderly compassionate women... (The Revenge for Love, Penguin Books, 1972, p. 55.)

its use is explicable readily enough. To begin with, the belaboured construction may contribute to the meaning proper: it symbolizes the sick confusion of Don Percy's mind and the urgency of the situation. The preposing of part of the verb phrase is also justified by the moving-up of the anaphoric phrase this woman which links the sentence to the previous text. (A common text-strategic principle is to place such references early in the sentence.) The focus on must is signalled by italics. And then Lewis's text contains an unusually high density of elaborate, unusual, and in that sense strongly "foregrounded" or strongly "marked" word-order patterns, thematizations and topicalizations,[3] which helps us to attune our stylistic expectations to them, and to accept them more readily when they occur. To give just one more instance,

(4) Interfere she was unable to.

occurs in the context

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3 These terms have been used in many different senses. I have tried to distinguish between 'thematizations', that is, arrangements of the sentence which change the linear ordering by changing grammatical surface relations (passivization for instance), and 'topicalizations' which merely move elements without affecting their grammatical relations (for instance the verb frontings in (2) and (4) would count as topicalizations).

(5) Margot turned away. Interfere she was unable to. But watch she could not. Even her impulse to protest become feeble, but she could not stand by while he took those things out... (Ibid., p. 372.)

Here one justifying factor is the parallellism, or iconic relationship, between the second and the third sentences of the quotation. And such an iconic homomorphism should remind us that a very large and important category of contextually justifiable but otherwise odd structures occur in poetry, where requirements of metre, rhythm, and form often motivate the use of patterns that would look alien indeed if shorn of their proper literary context. Thus of the two sentences,

(6) (a) On the bald streets breaks the blank day.
(b) The blank day breaks on the bald streets.

variant (b) would be the more common, less marked variant when looked at in isolation. But in the original context, only variant (a) satisfies the iconic requirements:

(7) He is not here; but far away
The noise of life begins again,
And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain
On the bald streets breaks the blank day.

I am, of course, quoting from Tennyson's In Memoriam.

1.4. In Swedish, unlike English, a selection rule suffices to disambiguate object fronting. The Swedish sentence

(8) (a) Osten åt råttan i går.

is more acceptable (at least when focussed on osten and i går) than would be the corresponding English

(b) *The cheese ate the rat yesterday.

Therefore Jan Olof Olsson could claim syntactic legitimacy for a sentence such as

(9) En hundskatt som tyskarna infört och som försvårade stammarnas möjlighet till jakt fyrdubblade de nya mandatherrarna.

The context is

(10) I januari 1919 manövrerade Smuts i Paris så att Sydafrika fick behålla [den tyska besittningen] som koloni, under namnet mandat. Denna helgade uppgift ... satte Sydafrika omedelbart i gång med att sköta ... Inledningsvis genomförde sydafrikanska trupper ... en straffaktion mot stammen Ukuanyama i Ovamboland ... Den jord som tyskarna tagit från hereros och hottentotter fick de inte tillbaka. I stället gavs den nu åt vita farmare från Sydafrika. En hundskatt som tyskarna infört och som försvårade stammarnas möjlighet till jakt fyrdubblade de nya mandatherrarna. I den oro som bröt ut återkom några av ledarna som under de tyska kolonialkrigen flytt till Sydafrika, trots förbud, och detta utlöste panik hos de lokala ämbetsmännen ...
(Rivna fanor. Stockholm: Bonniers, 1975, p. 180.)

But though such object fronting is syntactically legitimate in Swedish, we may still discuss its stylistic desirability in each particular instance. Is it adequately motivated by some text-strategic principle, for instance that of beginning a sentence with old information that links it to the previous text? If it is, well and good; if it is not, the writer is open to criticism for having succumbed needlessly to the allurements of elegant variation.[4]

1.5. Next an example of the opposite situation, that is, of a sentence which is acceptable in isolation but which does not fit its textual frame. I shall not here go into semantics at word level, into matters of denotation and connotation which may affect the semantic fit of a sentence into its textual environment. Instead I shall

4 The negative overtones of 'elegant variation' are well known to all readers of Fowler's Modern English Usage: "It is the second-rate writers, those intent rather on expressing themselves prettily than on conveying their meaning clearly, and still more those whose notions of style are based on a few misleading rules of thumb, that are chiefly open to the allurements of elegant variation." (S.v. 'elegant variation'.)

belabour a passage from the beginning of Frithiof Nilsson Piraten's Bombi Bitt och jag. Swedish is in fact a good language to draw upon because it is somewhat more flexible than English in providing thematic variants of the same underlying sentence. Let us, then, take the structure

(11) Stins var min fader i Tosterup.

This sentence would be odd in the frame

(12) Min vagga vaggade i Färs härad av Malmöhus län. Stins var min fader i Tosterup. Mina föräldrar var goda och ömma. Jag var en vanartig son.

In this textual frame, a better thematic arrangement (in fact the one chosen by Piraten) is

(13) Min vagga vaggade i Färs härad av Malmöhus län. Min fader var stins i Tosterup. Mina föräldrar var goda och ömma. Jag var en vanartig son.

But sentence (11) would be perfectly natural in the frame

(14) "Farbror Anders var ju stins i Lund, eller hur?" "Nej. Stins var min fader i Tosterup. I Lund hade han bara jobbat som stationskarl i några år."

We might even try to measure the degree and specificity of textual fit for thematic sentence variants. One hypothesis would then be that a more basic, common, unmarked sentence pattern, such as untopicalized Swedish SVO or SVC as in Min fader var stins i Tosterup., could be expected to fit a larger variety of frames than a topicalized and therefore more strongly marked and more specific thematic variant such as Stins var min fader i Tosterup. If this is so, the text

(15) "Farbror Anders var ju stins i Lund, eller hur?" "Nej. Min fader var stins i Tosterup. I Lund hade han bara jobbat som stationskarl i några år."

should strike us as being more natural and fluent than

text (12). In (15), the basic, common structure occurs in a context which might motivate a more marked sentence pattern, namely that of (11); in (12), a more marked sentence structure occurs in a context where a less marked sentence structure would do. If we regard (15) as a better text than (12), which would be a very plausible judgment, the explanation may lie in a principle of textual fit involving minimal markedness: it is better to use less marked than more marked sentence structures, unless the use of marked ones is strongly enough motivated.

1.6.1. One of the factors that affects the contextual acceptability of a sentence is its sentence stress and focus pattern. A focally unmarked English sentence has its sentence stress, recognizable by the placing of the nucleus of the intonation pattern, on an indefinite noun phrase in rhematic position, as in

(16) He was eating a sandwich.

If there is no indefinite noun phrase in the rheme, the sentence stress falls on the final element,

(17) He was eating the sandwich with great relish.

The sentence stress may fall on an initial indefinite noun phrase if the final noun phrase is definite and there is no suitable final element to carry it:

(18) A girl was basking on the beach.

But in addition to such unfocussed patterns we can also subject many sentence patterns to a paradigm of permutations with marked focus (focal stress and intonation being marked with capitals):

(19) (a) JOHN was eating a sandwich.
(b) John WAS eating a sandwich.
(c) John was EATING a sandwich.
(d) John was eating A sandwich.
(e) John was eating a SANDWICH.

Of these monofocal permutations, the one with focal empha-

sis on the auxiliary WAS is emphatic (if there is no auxiliary, we insert a DO as in

(20) John DID eat a sandwich.)

in the insistent sense: John really was, he really did. If the focus falls on a form word (article, preposition, etc.), it marks this form word as new information unknown to the recipient of the message, and if the form word is part of the grammatical machinery, the implication is that the receiver does not know the language. Hence the flavour of a grammar lesson of patterns such as

(21) He came BY air.

If the focus falls on some content word, it marks this content word as new information in a place usually reserved for old information: JOHN was eating a sandwich. is roughly equivalent to the clefted

(22) It was John who was eating a sandwich.

because both presuppose that the listener already knows that somebody was eating a sandwich, and add the new information that this 'somebody' was John. The bifocal pattern

(23) JOHN was eating a SANDWICH (and Mary an apple).

similarly presupposes that somebody was eating something, and inserts the values John and sandwich for the variables, somebody and something, in the presupposition.

1.6.2. The use of focussed constructions, then, presupposes that the non-focussed parts are familiar information, and that the focus marks new information, particularly when the new information occurs in a place in the sentence which usually contains old information. (Focus on auxiliaries and form-words may mean something else, as we have seen.) Conversely, it follows that a focussed construction is only natural when used under the presuppo-

sitional conditions that it implies. Now some constructions are focally free in the sense that, like John was eating a sandwich., they can take focus on any constituent. Others, however, are focally bound, in the sense that they cannot undergo a full series of focal permutations. For example

(24) A professor he had been in Canada.

can be focussed as

(25) A PROFESSOR he had been in CANADA.

in a text such as

(26) "Peter had been a professor in Calcutta." "No, a PROFESSOR he had been in CANADA. In CALCUTTA he worked for the British COUNCIL - in fact he didn't teach at all."

But it cannot be focussed as

(27) ^{x}A professor HE had been in Canada.

(except perhaps marginally, echoing and correcting a sentence such as A PROFESSOR she had been in CANADA.).
It follows that the contextual fit of focally bound structures is more limited than that of focally unbound structures.

1.7.1. As I have used the term "markedness", which has been given different senses in different contexts, I owe my readers another digression of the meaning in which I myself use it in the present paper. To begin with, a general taxonomy of the different uses of the terms "marked" and "unmarked" member of an opposition might look like this, if arranged from the more formal to the more impressionistic types of definition:

(i) Markedness as a concept correlated with the use of formal markers in a description of a language. The marked member of the opposition is the member

which has a marking feature which is absent from the unmarked member. Such marking features may be

(a) phonological: in the opposition p / b, b would be the marked member because it has a feature, voice, absent from the corresponding description of p;

(b) morphological: in the oppositions book/books or kick/kicked, the plural and the past tense are the marked forms because they carry the markers -s and -ed;

(c) syntactic: in the opposition active / passive, a generative-transformational model would suggest that the passive is the marked member because it is derived out of the active with an additional marker, namely passivization;

(d) lexical: in the opposition lion /lioness, lioness is not only marked morphologically with -ess but also semantically because lion applies to both male and female lions, lioness exclusively to female ones. We can thus correlate this with the additional marker /+feminine/ in the semantic matrix of lioness.

Note that the choice of descriptive model and method of description will determine markedness relations as well. In the opposition p / b, it might at first sight seem "natural" in the sense of 'consonant with a physical fact' to regard b as the marked member because of its additional feature, voice. But we might also decide that p and b differ because p has a feature such as aspiration or fortis which is lacking in b. If so, it is p that turns out to be the marked member. In other words, it is the linguist's interpretation of the physical substance of language, rather than physical phenomena as such, which determines markedness in linguistic description.

(ii) Markedness as a concept correlated with a distribution pattern: a wide distribution suggests less

marking, a restricted distribution more marking. This criterion can again be applied to different levels of linguistic description. Thus in morphology, the English plural morpheme /s/ with its various allomorphs has a wider distribution than, say, the plural morpheme /n/ as in oxen. At a stylistic level, ending a letter with yours sincerely is a more widely used device than ending one with yours faithfully (the latter being used only in formal letters to unnamed recipients).

(iii) Markedness as a concept correlated with objective frequency counts: the least marked structure is that member of an opposition which occurs most frequently in a suitably selected corpus of text.

(iv) Markedness as an intuitive concept: the least marked structure is the one that a suitably selected group of informants would characterize as the most 'common' or 'ordinary' or 'usual' or 'fluent', etc. In this sense, markedness is related to the 'foregrounding' of the Russian formalists and Prague-school linguists.

In terms of this taxonomy, I have spoken about "marked" sentence structures primarily in sense (iv), that is, involving structures we feel to be elaborate in comparison with a more common, usual structure. These impressions can, at least to some extent, be correlated with features of type (i:c), that is syntactic markedness: a topicalized sentence is thus more marked than an untopicalized one. So far, then, I have used "markedness" to refer to sentence structure. We might also speak about "markedness" at the text level, for instance to imply that the unmarked sentence in a given context is the one that begins with old information: if so, a *more* marked *sentence* type such as a passive may be the *less* marked *textual* variant. As it might be confusing to discuss these two types of "markedness" under the same term, and awkward to refer to syntactic markedness as opposed to contextual markedness, I shall

adopt a distinction between MARKEDNESS in the sense of the markedness of syntactic structures, and TEXTUAL FIT in the sense of the degree of adaptation that integrates a sentence into its context.

1.7.2. The distinction between textual fit and the markedness of syntactic structures has an analogue in the distinction between syntagmatic and paradigmatic markedness in phonology. In the opposition p / b, we may, as long as we work paradigmatically and without reckoning with context, decide that p is the unmarked, b the marked member of the opposition. But in the context V__V (where V stands for any voiced sound) we might argue that b is, syntagmatically, the unmarked, and p the marked member: a sequence consisting of three successive voiced sounds is syntagmatically less marked than a sequence consisting of voiced sound + unvoiced sound + voiced sound. In these terms, what I have called syntactic markedness becomes the textual counterpart of paradigmatic markedness in phonology, whereas textual fit turns out to be the textual counterpart of syntagmatic markedness.[5]

1.8. In practice, unfortunately, the grading of sentences by their textual fit is not an easy task. Various pilot experiments conducted by the present writer during the past several months have shown that informants do indeed often agree in their rankings of the textual fit of a set of thematic variants in a specific context. But there are instances in which judgments become difficult and subtle. Therefore problems of textual fit have often been regarded as relatively advanced questions of stylistic appropriateness rather than as questions of elementary correctness.[6] Our intuitions of textual fit are also often

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5 I owe this clarification to a discussion with Kalevi Wiik.

6 It is significant that many error analysis projects concentrate on more basic and readily analyzable matters, leaving subtler word-order patterns beyond their scope. An exception was Malcolm Hicks's paper "An Analysis of

hazy and hard to pin down into verbalizations. But this should not be taken to imply that the effects of context on acceptability are negligible. Indeed we may even suspect that acceptability judgments always depend on context, and, more specifically, on the informants' ability of contextualizing a sentence that is presented in isolation. That is, when an informant is to pronounce on the acceptability of a sentence given out of context, he tries to invent a context in which that sentence is acceptable; if he fails, he will reject it as unacceptable. (This view might suggest new types of elicitation experiments more explicitly based

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Word Order Errors in English" read at Åbo Akademi on February 28, 1973. Hicks gave a number of examples of errors taken from translations from Finnish by undergraduate students of English at Oulu University. Hicks was careful to emphasize that "the identification of error is not such a straightforward matter in the case of word order as it may be in some other areas of grammar," and that "word order preferences in English are subject to considerable variation between individual speakers and ... styles and usages"; there is therefore "a number of cases in which English speakers would themselves disagree as to whether an error had been made". Among Hicks's examples of major types of error were the following:

(vii) These rules most of the couples getting engaged don't know.

(viii) That those stupid fellows won't do.

(ix) To the man who is not accustomed to islands it is always reasonable to emphasize that...

Granted, such instances of direct-object and indirect-object preposing are a minor category in Hicks's error taxonomy, which was furthermore set up with an explicitly normative purpose. It is all the same worth noting that examples such as (vii) - (ix) might be all right in certain contexts. In fact they are, if anything, less weird than sentences (2) and (4) cited above from Wyndham Lewis. I cite this, not of course to criticize Hicks but to show how right he was in emphasizing the difficulty of defining 'errors'. Part of the relativity of acceptability in such instances depends on textual information dynamics and thus on the context. Such observations also raise several practical questions: why is it possible to teach English to Finns (and to Scandinavians) paying so little attention to contextually conditioned word-order patterns? At what stage in the educational system should such matters be systematically taught, and how?

on contextualization.) Potential textual fit may thus be an important acceptability criterion.

2.1. If, then, acceptability is affected by context, we must face the problem of finding out to what extent contextually conditioned variations in textual fit affect our definition and analysis of errors. We often think of 'errors proper' as breaches against rules of basic grammar. But there are variations in textual fit that resist neat pigeonholing into compartments of right and wrong. If we wish to extend the term 'error' to cover for instance awkward word-order patterns which fail to fit the context, we must agree that errors are not always errors in an absolute sense. A structure which sometimes seems erroneous need not always be wrong. It may be awkward in one set of contexts but all right in another set of contexts. This is the starting-point of a grading of acceptabilities according to what aspects of the context a sentence fails to fit. I have so far illustrated effects of thematic word order (information flow, functional sentence perspective) on contextual acceptability, and shall go on concentrating on this particular type of problem. But we should note in passing that another type of clash between elements and contexts can arise in breaches of stylistic appropriateness and decorum, where a word or phrase is collocated with elements from a different stylistic level.

2.2. Nor should my terminology and approach make us forget that observations of this kind have been made by hosts of rhetoricians over the centuries. The trouble is that older authorities have often operated with an unsatisfactorily loose terminology and a lax conceptual frame. Rhetoricians have thus spoken about "the necessity for uninterrupted movement", "faulty sentence emphasis", "the emphasis of the separate sentences and the coherence

of the whole", "paragraph emphasis" and "coherence",[7] sometimes in entire passages such as the following from Genung:

(28) Dynamic Stress. - Every sentence and every clause has its dynamic point, its centre of action, from which its power and significance are to be reckoned; and this must be kept in mind by the writer, in order to determine the proper relation of parts to each other, and of the whole sentence to other sentences in the paragraph. Some claims of this dynamic stress may here be noted.

The Stress-Point as a Cue. - An idea from which a succeeding clause or sentence is to take its cue should be made prominent by position or wording, that is, should have the dynamic stress. Equally important it is, on the other side, to mass the succeeding sentence according to the cue recognized in its predecessor; on the principle of closing with already suggested thought as an outset; and pushing on from this to a new assertion.

...

Claims of Variety. - It is principally through the good management of the dynamic stress that the variety of phrase and movement so essential to the interest of the reader is maintained.

1. When, in clauses or sentences of like construction, an element has once had a certain stress, there is no need of giving it the same stress again, except in the special case where it is desirable to emphasize its iteration. It is better to put the repeated idea in a subordinate relation, or change its relative order, so as to reserve the stress for a new aspect of the thought ...

2. A natural result of the observance of the cue and the adjustment of succeeding stress to it, is that in a series of sentences the stress is continually varied, coming in the beginning of some sentences and in the end of others. This is of course a thing for watchfulness and artistic management; regard being had always for the two considerations: variation of rhythm, and grouping of related ideas together ...

3. The deadly snare of the jaded or perfunctory writer - and, it may be added, of that much-vaunted being the spontaneous writer - is, monotony of sentence structure, a wooden movement, with the same

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7 Charles Sears Baldwin, A College Manual of Rhetoric, 4th edition (London, Bombay and Calcutta: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909) pp. 19, 155, and 246-7.

rise and fall, the same type of sentence, the same relative placement of stress, dominating the whole work.[8]

2.3. Roland Harweg is one of the recent text linguists who have tried to add linguistic precision to the discussion of these problems. He identifies the problem of good style with the problem of fluent style (flüssiger Stil), and expects a rational analysis of such matters to emerge from a text grammar:

(29) Der Anspruch, dieses Explikandum, das Phänomen des flüssigen Stils - und damit indirekt auch das mit ihm identische Phänomen des guten Stils -, rational durchleuchten zu können, aber impliziert eine völlige Neuorientierung in der Konzeption der auf jedes Phänomen gerichteten Form der traditionellen Stilistik, ja mehr noch: er verlangt nichts weniger als die Überführung dieser Form von Stilistik in eine Form von Grammatik, eine Form von Grammatik freilich, deren Untersuchungsbereich nicht, wie bisher, einzelne Sätze, sondern statt dessen aus Satzfolgen bestehende Textabschnitte oder Texte sind und die man dementsprechend seit kurzem als Textgrammatik zu bezeichnen pflegt.[9]

To transfer stylistics into grammar, says Harweg, implies a translation of the evaluative concept of Gutheit into the non-evaluative concept of Richtigkeit:

(30) Ein stilistisch guter Text is demzufolge also nichts anderes als ein textgrammatisch richtiger Text, und dies wiederum impliziert, dass es gilt, jener tiefverwurzelten und weitverbreiteten Ansicht entgegenzutreten, dass man grammatische Fehler nur im Bereich der Morphologie und der satzorientierten Syntax machen könne oder schlimmer noch: dass als grammatische Fehler nur die Verletzungen solcher Regeln zu betrachten seien, die von den einschlägigen Grammatiken als grammatische Regeln gekennzeichnet sind.[10]

Harweg, then, expects a text grammar to provide us with rules showing the difference between a good and a bad style:

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8 John Franklin Genung, The Working Principle of Rhetoric (Boston etc.: Ginn and Company, 1910), pp. 340-44.

9 Roland Harweg, "Stilistik und Textgrammatik," Lili II:5 (1975), p. 75.

10 Bid. p. 75.

a text which disobeys them is text-grammatically incorrect and has a poor style. He is, however, not prepared to present such a text grammar: what he does is to cite a passage of prose by Thomas Mann, to rewrite it with the aim of improving its cohesion (presumably with the aid of his own linguistic and stylistic intuitions and critical acumen), and to analyze and discuss the principles which underlay the rewriting. Among these principles are a rule that sentences which are specified by the word eigentlich require certain kinds of previous information; that cross-references should be sufficiently closely related semantically; and the like. Harweg himself ends his paper by disclaiming all completeness and by emphasizing that all he has given consists of a few vague and disconnected observations, which do, however, indicate the existence of text-grammatical rules leading to a rational theory of good style. A sceptic might of course ask how such a view affects the ontology of text grammar and how it stretches the definitions of concepts such as grammar and rule, which have often been given a far more restricted meaning.

3.1. Information dynamics (theme-rheme structure, thematization, functional sentence perspective, topic-comment articulation) is obviously one of the factors influencing the textual fit of a sentence. The apparatus with whose aid matters of information dynamics can be analysed and described is that involving theme, rheme, and focus (or topic, comment, and focus, to use another of the current terminologies). In a medium-sized paper, all I can do is to remind my readers of this large and expanding area of current linguistics. It is, however, crucial to note that thematics should be viewed in a textual perspective, not as a property of the isolated sentence. The parameters affecting the informational arrangement, the choice of theme and rheme, are textual in the sense that they consist of devices linking sentences to one another as well as devices distinguishing between old and new information. They are important parameters of textual fit.

3.2. Different linguists have defined theme and rheme in different ways: as logical subject and predicate; as psychological subject (what we sense the sentence to be about) and psychological predicate; as old and new information; as a minimum and a maximum of communicative dynamism; as elements with different scope (theme being the maximally scopeful constituent); and as elements marked formally, by morphemes (such as Japanese wa) or by word order (so that themes occur in the front of the clause or sentence). These definitions need not be viewed as necessarily excluding one another. In fact they may all be right. The choice of definition rather depends on the choice of level at which we wish to define theme and rheme. The psychological definition refers to our linguistic intuitions, the logical definition and definition by scope to a semantic description in logical terms, and the definition by old and new information or by degrees of communicative dynamism to the speaker/writer's text strategies, whereas the formal definitions are related to surface syntax.

We might even hypothesize that the textually best-fitting thematic structure would be the one where the different qualities of theme and rheme (which served as a basis for different definitions) are all reconciled and thus made true at the same time. The optimal solution would be to make a theme of a logical subject which is maximally scopeful and expresses old information. In English this would be done by placing it at or near the beginning of the clause or sentence. With a minimum of syntactic markedness, this placing can be achieved by turning the theme into a syntactic subject or into an adverbial that readily occurs in front position. If some special movement operation such as topicalization is necessary to front the theme, the structure becomes syntactically more marked, while its textual fit improves. In this light we can look at thematic variants of sentences in context and try to explain the interplay between syntactic markedness and textual fit. An example; this time an artificial one invented for the pur-

pose.

3.3. Let us look at sentence 3 in

(31) [1]Susan's husband John is very good at doing things in the house. [2]He installed a new kitchen sink. And [3a]he painted the bathroom. / [3b]the bathroom was painted by him. / [3c]the bathroom he painted.

All three alternatives are 'correct' in terms of basic grammar. In (3a) the initial he links the sentence coreferentially and iconically to sentence (2) which also began with he; it indicates old information and is the subject. In (3b) the initial noun phrase, the bathroom, conveys new information which is, however, cross-referentially related to house and kitchen sink; the sentence-final agent, by him, refers to old information. Thus in (3b) the principle that a sentence should begin with old and end with new information is less strictly followed than in (3a). Variant (3b) also breaks against the principle of end weight by having a light anaphoric pronoun in final position. Of the alternatives,(3c) is the most strongly marked. The OSV structure would be more natural with focus on the O and V elements as in

(31)(3d) The BATHROOM he PAINTED (but the KITCHEN he only WALLPAPERED).

But in (3c) there is no textual justification of this kind. That (3c) avoids ending the sentence with old information as did (3b) does not seem to redeem it. For our intuition tells us that (3a) is the most acceptable variant with the best fit in this particular context. It satisfies the requirements of iconic cohesion, begins with old information and ends with new information, assigns the old information into the subject, and satisfies the principle of end weight by avoiding sentence-final pronouns. Apparently the context does not contain factors that would, in comparison, adequately justify the use of variants (3b) and (3c).

The reader may now wish to return to the Swedish examples given above in (11) - (15) to see to what extent they can be analyzed according to similar principles.

4.1. Next a word about the contrastive aspects of information dynamics.

4.2. The contrastive study of information dynamics might well start from a rehearsal of relevant language typologies. There is of course the well-worn typological distinction between synthetic languages, which indicate the functions of constituents in the sentence with the aid of inflections, and analytic languages, which indicate such functions with the aid of word-order patterns and free morphemes. In an analytic language, word-order patterns are therefore more closely tied by basic syntax and less free to reflect information dynamics. Another typological distinction has recently been suggested by Li and Thompson. They speak about subject-prominent languages, in which basic constructions manifest a subject-predicate rather than (in their terminology) topic-comment relation; about topic-prominent languages, in which basic constructions manifest a topic-comment relation rather than one between subject and predicate; about languages that are both topic-prominent and subject-prominent; and about languages that are neither. Indo-European languages qualify as subject-prominent; Chinese as topic-prominent; Japanese and Korean are both subject-prominent and topic-prominent; and Tagalog is neither. In subject prominent languages, the "topic has become integrated into the case frame of [the] verb as a subject; [the] subject and topic are often indistinct, subjects having some non-topic properties; [and] sentences with clear topics are highly marked."[11]

4.3. Such typologies indeed provide a useful background against which we can view contrastive studies of information dynamics. Li and Thompson were concerned with a global view, but even within their subject-prominent language group there is a great deal of gradation between,

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11 Charles N. Li and Sandra A. Thompson, "Subject and Topic: A New Typology of Language," pp. 457-489 in Charles N. Li, ed., Subject and Topic (New York etc.: Academic Press,1976).

among other things, the extent to which subject and topic (theme) must coincide, and the extent to which word order is free to reflect thematic relations. Now if we are teaching an extremely analytic and subject-prominent language (say, English) to speakers of a more synthetic and more theme- or topic-prominent language (say, Russian, or, in a less striking sense, even Swedish), the learner's problem is presumably twofold. He has to learn to restrict himself to word-order patterns permissible in the target language. And he has to learn to express by other means those features of information dynamics that his source language expresses by means of word order. These other means involve differences in stress and intonation patterns, particularly in connection with focus and implicature; passives, clefts, dislocations, and the use of converses that shift transitivity. The same problem in reverse must be faced by those learners whose source is a less theme-prominent language, and whose target is a more theme-prominent language, say by an Englishman learning Russian. Those conditioned to rigid syntax-determined patterns may find it difficult to learn to use the full repertoire of thematic variation permissible in a more theme-oriented linguistic structure.

4.4. Such hypotheses at once raise interesting didactic problems. Though the study of information dynamics was pioneered by scholars working with contrastive problems (Henri Weil with French versus Latin and Greek, Vilem Mathesius with Czech versus English), elementary language teaching has practically ignored matters of theme, rheme and information dynamics. Somewhere along the line we have lost the Renaissance tradition that contrasted English and Latin in terms of a "natural" word order (that of English, also possible in Latin) and an "artificial" word order (namely those thematic arrangements of Latin sentences that built on patterns other than SVO). Perhaps this is so because information dynamics has so far been so completely ignored by the major currents of western lin-

guistics (Prague-school and Hallidayan notions having not yet come into their right). Perhaps it is so also because matters of information dynamics are complex and sometimes subtle.

4.5. Whatever the reason for this neglect, the problems themselves are inescapable. One of the pursuits where they come to the fore is, of course, translation. Indeed I have elsewhere[12] argued for the inclusion of information-dynamic patterning among criteria for translational accuracy. There may be situations in which a translator is justified in changing syntactic patterns and lexical choices if need be in order to preserve thematic ones. A simple illustration will show what I have in mind.

4.6. In languages such as Finnish which are lacking in articles (I am here concerned with standard Finnish, not the kind of colloquial Finnish in which yks and se take the functions of articles) the question of definiteness is intimately connected with the thematic treatment of old and new information. This poses very special problems. For instance

(32) Punaisen mökin edessä oli auto pysäköitynä.

can be translated in a number of ways:

(33) (a) In front of a red cottage there was a parked car.
(b) In front of the red cottage there was a parked car.
(c) A parked car stood in front of the red cottage.

Even the translation

(34) The car had been parked in front of the red cottage.

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12 N.E. Enkvist, "Contrastive Text Linguistics and the Theory and Practice of Translation", forthcoming in the papers of Nobel Symposium 39: The Theory and Practice of Translation, held in Stockholm in September, 1976.

might be acceptable as long as the Finnish has auto pysäköitynä. Had the Finnish been,

(35) Punaisen mökin edessä oli pysäköitynä auto.

the car is more obviously new information and must, in English, be presented with the indefinite article. The point is that an evaluation of the different English renderings will necessitate references to the context which show whether the cottage and the car are old or new information. Only against such a context will it be possible to prefer one translation to the others.

4.7. Next, an example from an actual translation, namely Watson's The Double Helix:

(36) (a) By now I had decided to mark time by working on tobacco mosaic virus (TMV) ... Moreover, TMV had previously been looked at with X rays by J.D. Bernal and I. Fankucken... TMV was constructed from a large number of identical subunits. How the subunits were arranged they did not know. Moreover, 1939 was too early to come to grips with the fact that the protein and RNA components were likely to be constructed along radically different lines. By now, however, protein subunits were easy to imagine in large numbers.
(James D. Watson, The Double Helix, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968, pp. 110-111.)

(b) Tuohon aikaan olin päättänyt käyttää aikani tutkimalla tupakan mosaikkivirusta (TMV) ... Lisäksi TMV:tä olivat aikaisemmin tutkineet röntgensäteillä J.D. Bernal ja I. Fankucken... TMV:n muodosti suuri joukko identtisiä rakenteita. He eivät tienneet kuinka osarakenteet olivat järjestyneet. Sitäpaitsi vuosi 1939 oli liian varhainen, jotta olisi voitu käsittää sitä seikkaa, että proteiini- ja RNA-komponentit rakentuivat todennäköisesti täysin eri tavoilla. Nyt oli kuitenkin jo helppo kuvitella proteiinirakenteet suuriksi ryhmiksi.
(James D. Watson, Kaksoiskierre, suomentanut Otto Hokkala, Tapiola: Weilin ja Göös 1969, pp. 104-105.)

(c) Seks ajaks olin ma juba otsustanud ajatäiteks tubakamosaiikviiruse (TMV) uurimisele asuda... Seejuures olid J.D. Bernal ja I. Fankucken TMV-d juba röntgenograafilisel meetodil uurinud... TMV koostiseks on suur hulk ühesuguseid allühikuid. Kuidas need allühikud paiknevad, seda Bernal ja Fankucken

> ei teadnud. Pealegi polnud fakt, et tubakamosaiikviiruse RNA- ja valk-komponent on oma ehituselt toenäoliselt täitesti erisugused, 1939, aastal veel teaduslikuks seletukseks küps. Praegu aga on /sic!/ lihtne kujutleda, et valk-komponent koosneb väga paljudest allühikudest.
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> (James D. Watson, Kaksikspiraal, inglise keelest tolkinud Henno Rajandi, Tallinn: "Loomingu" raamatukogu, 1970, pp. 73-74.)

As always in translations of Germanic passives, it is interesting to see how Finnish and Estonian render the sentence

(37) TMV was constructed from a large number of identical subunits.

The Finnish translator, it will be seen, has simply fronted the object. The Estonian translator would have had at his disposal the pattern

(38) Seejures oli TMV-d juba röntgenograafilisel meetodil uuritud J.D. Bernali ja I. Fankuckeni poolt.

But this structure is frowned upon by many Estonians as owing to alien influence and as stylistically awkward. Therefore the Estonian sentence fails to follow the information dynamics of the original. In the next sentence, however, where the Finnish has a topicalized object, (TMV:n), the Estonian translator turned the surface subject of the English passive sentence into a topicalized predicative complement in the translative case (TMV koostiseks). This time the Estonian rendering follows the information dynamics of the English original, but changes the syntax. The context in other words justifies a translation which might look unduly free when viewed in isolation.

5.1. Considerations of textual fit, acceptability and error evaluation inevitably lead us to one of the most fundamental questions of linguistics -- that is

the problem of degrees of determination at different levels of language. This problem has a long history beginning from the debate between analogists and anomalists in ancient Greece and coming down to us through, among other phases, the Neogrammarian debate, the Prague-school distinction between core and periphery, Quirk's serial relationship, Ross's squishes, Labov's weighted rules, Haas's distinction between rules and tendencies, and the like. These questions are relevant to error analysts because the definition and evaluation of an error are directly related to the firmness, or degree of determination, of the rule which is broken. If we could learn to describe language in terms of absolute rules which allow no exceptions, we could also define breaches of such rules as absolute errors. This was Roland Harweg's strategy, as we saw above in section 2.3. If one the other hand there are linguistic phenomena which are not subject to absolute rules but rather to tendencies and graded preferences, we cannot regard breaches of such tendencies as errors in the same sense as breaches of absolute rules. Deviations from normal tendencies on the contrary become matters of rhetoric rather than grammar, of more or less felicitous expression, of greater or less stylistic boldness, of good or bad manners, of conformity or rebellion. To what extent there is a sharp dichotomy between absolute rules and mere tendencies is another moot point. Some linguists might perhaps wish to see a cline between absolute rules and, at the other extreme, matters of indeterminate choice or random preference.

5.2. The question I am leading up to in conclusion is: To what extent are matters of textual fit and information dynamics subject to firm rules, and to what extent are they mere tendencies? An operationalized variant of this question -- the kind of variant that appeals to people working with applied linguistics -- could ask to what extent information-dynamic structures should be subjected to rules. Would there be any practical sense in

trying to construct normative text grammars, more stringently formalizing matters of the kind discussed by Baldwin, Genung, and Harweg, and then marking deviations from the rules of such normative text grammars as errors? My own inclination is to answer this question in the negative. I do firmly believe that concepts such as textual fit or "smoth flow of discourse" are explicable in operational terms with the aid of concepts such as cross-reference, theme, rheme, focus, and theme-dynamic pattern. And I think we ought to remove all needless mystique from the descriptions of cohesion in the flow of discourse. But this does not mean that we should simplify matters to the extent of subjecting them to crudely unrealistic rules, running the risk of penalizing writers for attempts at variation and artistry. In judging the communicative effects of text strategies and information-dynamic patterns, we must once again -- as indeed in all work with language -- rest squarely on the intuitions of suitably selected informants, rather than encourage the tyranny of oversimplified normative rules. In language teaching, of the first language as well as of a foreign one, the teacher must assume the role of such an informant, whether he wants to or not. For those of us engaged in teacher training, the question is to what extent our teachers are, and ought to be, prepared to accept this extremely difficult task.

After this paper was read at the University of Stockholm on February 8, 1977, I have seen or received offprints of another three articles testifying to the topical character of problems of contextual acceptability: I.R. Gal'perin, "K probleme zavisimosti predloženija ot konteksta", Voprosy Jazykoznanija 1977:1, 46-55; Teun A. van Dijk, "Acceptability in Context", forthcoming in Sidney Greenbaum, ed., Acceptability in Language, The Hague & Paris: Mouton; and Sidney Greenbaum, "Syntactic Frequency and Acceptability", Lingua 40:2/3 (1976), 99-113.